

# Setting up a Committee of Safety

Many Committees of Safety were established throughout Colonial America at the start of the American Revolution. These committees started to appear in the 1760s as means to discuss the concerns of the time, and often consisted of every male adult in the community. The local militia units were usually under the control of the committees, which in turn sent representatives to county- and colony-level assemblies to represent their local interests.

Committees of Safety formed before and during the Revolutionary War, to keep watch of and act upon events pertaining to the public welfare. They were sometimes possessed of almost supreme executive power, delegated to them by the people. Massachusetts took the lead in the appointment of a committee of safety so early as the autumn of 1774, of which John Hancock was chairman. It was given power to call out mandatory militia, with penalties for failing to respond to a call-up, and provide means of defense. It provided many of the functions of a provisional government. Other colonies appointed committees of safety. One was appointed in the city of New York, composed of the leading citizens. In the spring of 1778, the New York state legislature abolished all committees in New York in favor of "Commissioners of Conspiracy".

These committees were in constant communication with committees of correspondence, which disseminated information among the militia units and provided a clearinghouse of information and intelligence on enemy activities.

## How a modern Committee of Safety was set up

In early 1995, the commanders of about a dozen militia units that had been formed in nearby counties in south central Texas decided to set up a Committee of Safety for the region that would provide a governing body for militia units and confer some legitimacy on them in the public perception. They took the following steps:

1. Adopted a set of by-laws for the CoS that prescribed the number of members, the method of election, a quorum for making decisions, rules of procedure, and relation to militia units.
2. Appointed a nominating committee to nominate members, with many more nominees than there were positions to be filled, and a procedure for allowing additional nominees by petition of a few citizens of the counties who were qualified to vote in local elections.
3. Selected an election day, and issued public notices of it, explaining that anyone qualified to vote in any public election in the counties in which it would be held would be qualified to vote for members of the Committee of Safety. They also issued the list of nominees, invited petitions for additional nominees, and publicized the by-laws of the Committee of Safety.
4. Selected and announced at least one polling place in each county. (All of the counties were rural.)

5. Recruited volunteers to man the polling places on election day.
6. Just prior to the election, after some additional nominees had been added by petition, printed ballots with the names of all the nominees, and allowed a space for write-in votes.
7. On election day conducted the election, counted the ballots, and announced the winners. The number of voters was about 3% of those qualified to vote, which was more than some voter rates for minor offices. Most of the voters had never attended a militia muster, yet seemed knowledgeable about the candidates and the issues, and made wise choices.
8. The newly elected Committee of Safety met, and elected its officers according to its by-laws. It then met regularly for several months.

However, the by-laws had some critical flaws: There were no provisions for the Committee of Safety to amend them or replace members who might resign before the next election, or to reduce the quorum to a percentage of remaining members. A number of members began to resign to run for other public offices, such as constable, sheriff, and county commissioner. (One was elected county commissioner.) When the number fell below quorum, no further decisions could be made and the CoS stopped meeting. Because the by-laws had been issued in a public notice, the remaining members concluded they needed to be amended in another public election, and until then, lacked the authority to amend them, but without a quorum, they were unable to conduct another election.

## How to set up Committee of Safety

Despite the problems with the ways the Committee of Safety was set up in south central Texas, the procedure outlined above can be used as a model for others, if the defects noted are avoided.

The formation and operation of the Committee of Safety succeeded brilliantly in legitimizing militia units with the general public. Almost every candidate for local public office, especially constables and sheriffs, felt they had to appear before it and before militia units asking for their votes. Practically everyone accepted that holding that public election, by public notice, as well as issuing public notices of militia musters, made the militia units public institutions, requiring no other sanction such as state legislation. Their activities became newsworthy, and many local newspapers who had required them to pay for public notices began to publish them at no charge. The concept of militia became better known, and met general approval.

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### External links:

- **Committees of Protection, Correspondence and Safety** — Collection of historical documents.
  - **Texas Election Code** — Chapter 4, Notice of Election.
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